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Hewn from Stone: (Re)Presenting Soviet Material Cultures and Identities

Dominique Moran

Abstract

This paper is concerned with the 'production' of items of material culture, including monuments, made from precious and semi-precious stone, in the early Soviet Union (1920s and 1930s). Selecting examples such as the stars which top the Kremlin towers, it engages with the issues of production of these items, in particular the significance of the materials from which they were made, and the (re)constructed identities of the craftsmen who made them. Drawing on contemporary press sources in order to access a particularly opaque public discourse surrounding these issues, the paper considers these items as embodiments of the labor of their makers, and interrogates the significance of that labor for the regime for which the objects were made. It concludes that through the act of production, Soviet workers re-produced and re-presented themselves in line with the imperatives of the commissioning state.

This paper discusses the use of precious and semi-precious stone¹ in 1920s and 1930s Soviet material culture, and links this discussion to an established discourse in Soviet historical studies – that of the remaking of Soviet labor. I connect these two for the simple reason that in the early Soviet period, they were closely entwined. Stone cutters or lapidaries, trained under the Tsarist system, and skilled at making the kind of luxury goods that later proved useful to the Soviet state, were remade, or in their own parlance, refaceted, into craftsmen laboring for the glory of the USSR. It was precisely through their work on objects of direct importance in the material culture of the Soviet Union, such as the Lenin Mausoleum, that they made this transition from imperial lapidaries to

Soviet workers. The focus is on the public discourse surrounding the workers and the products of one factory – ‘*Russkiye Samotsvety*’, Russian Gemstones, located in Sverdlovsk (Ekaterinburg) in the Urals, drawing on material from contemporary accounts and press sources. The paper addresses the issue of the status of skilled workers involved in the production of luxury goods under Soviet socialism in light of its emphasis on heavy industry and egalitarianism, by treating monuments as the embodiment of the labor of their makers and of their position in Soviet society, by addressing one of the contradictions of the Soviet value system, and by looking at the way the position of this particular group of workers was negotiated in the print media.

Monuments are widely understood as dynamic sites of meaning in the context of changing concepts of nation, civil society and identity; recent work on the iconography of national/political identities has focussed on the interpretation and meanings of monuments and items of material culture, and as Johnson writes, rather than treating public monuments as ‘innocent aesthetic embellishments of the public sphere alone’, recent scholarship has emphasized ‘the political and cultural meaning attached to them’². In the case of the former Soviet Union, there is a growing body of work analysing these political and cultural meanings, and particularly the changes in meanings attached to items of material culture during the post-Soviet transition. During the Soviet period, Lenin’s mausoleum, and the corpse of Lenin itself were analysed as objects instrumental in forming the ideology of Socialist Realism. Kujundzic (1990, 53) described the embalmed corpse as a ‘prop on the metaphysical stage of communism’, while Tumarkin related the view of Lenin’s contemporaries that the design of the mausoleum, a symbol of eternity, conveyed his ‘immortality’ in Soviet national identity. In the post-socialist era, Forest and Johnson have explored the formation of Russian national identity through a study of political struggles over key Soviet-era monuments and memorials in Moscow in

the 1990s, while Sidorov and Ladd discuss the significance of new monuments built on the cusp of transition; the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, built in the early 1990s, and a 1986 East Berlin monument to Marx and Engels³. These studies have largely focussed either on reconstructing the decision-making processes and political machinations behind the appearance of particular monuments, or on the ‘consumption’ of monuments by their audience, in terms of propaganda surrounding them, meanings attached to them, and the political manipulations of those meanings.

But there is more to the meaning of monuments than a focus on their finished form, and an emphasis the importance of their ‘production’ as well as ‘consumption’ is a fruitful line of enquiry. Using examples such as the stations of the Moscow Metro, the Soviet memorial to French writer Henri Barbusse, and the Kremlin Stars, this paper considers two aspects of the production of these items of material culture; the significance of the materials from which they were made, and the (re)constructed identities of the craftsmen who made them. In so doing, it emphasises the historically and geographically situated nature of this activity in the early Stalinist USSR. I consider monumental items of material culture as embodiments of the labor of their makers, and interrogate the significance of that labor for the regime for which the monuments and material cultural objects had political and nationalistic meaning. Further, I argue that through the act of production of these items of material culture, workers re-produced and re-presented themselves in line with the imperatives of the commissioning state.

The Cultural History of the Stalin Period

The work of historians such as Petrone, Fitzpatrick, and Hoffman amongst others has shown that the Western image of the early Stalinist era as a period of uninterrupted repression represents only part of the historical record⁴. There has been a shift towards a

new social and cultural history including everyday life, mentalities, discourses, rituals, and social practices in which Stalinism is understood as a ‘culture’. This paper is situated in this context of this social and cultural history, and structured around a set of questions about the nature of gem working in early Soviet Russia. Skilled workers whose expertise lay in the production of luxury goods, such as gemstone decorative items, had to adapt themselves to the new Soviet *milieu*. They had to find a way to present both themselves and the kind of goods they made as useful to the new Soviet society. But at the same time, the materials with which they worked were deeply associated with the aristocratic elite of the old regime, and they also had to be presented as appropriate for the new proletarian state. By interrogating these transformations and re-presentations through an examination of the public discourses surrounding the creation of objects of material culture in the early Soviet period – ie the ways in which these issues were surfaced and worked out in the public arena, such as the national and local press, and in published literature, I utilise the subjective representations of Soviet cultural life that were typical of this period to explore the types of metaphor and rhetoric that were used in the public representation of both stone and gemworkers.

Opening with a discussion of the nature of material culture, the context of the 1920s and 1930s Soviet Union, and a brief background to the heritage of stone working in Russia/USSR and in the Urals in particular, I then consider the processes of ‘reclaiming’ stone and gemworkers from their imperial past.

Material Culture

Material culture is a term commonly used in the archaeological literature to describe the buildings, tools, and other artefacts that constitute the material remains of former societies⁵. However, the term has become increasingly common in more contemporary

study, and is now frequently used in relation to the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. As Buchli writes, probably the most fundamental concern of students of material culture is how to understand and interpret societies through their artefacts⁶. He argues that of all the material cultures produced by societies, architecture is probably the most durable, long lasting and easily retrievable, and is also the material cultural matrix with which most other artefacts are often associated. As Gunther argues, architecture incorporates the spirit of a cultural epoch in a most conspicuous way⁷. However, while architecture is certainly important, other items have also come to prominence with recent work by Reid on domestic goods, and Gronow on luxury goods, such as Soviet champagne and caviar, and Soviet consumer culture⁸. The focus here is both on architecture and on other items of material culture such as Lenin's funeral plaque and Soviet era medals, and sees such items, as Cooke has argued, as 'materialized manifestations of ...societies' which are 'revealing and enduring descriptors of their attributes and tensions'⁹.

The cultural milieu of the 1920s and 1930s Soviet Union

Emerging out of the Civil War and War Communism, the 1920s and 30s saw the ailing and death of Lenin, and the rise of Stalin. This was an era of nation-building, of the forging of a collective national identity, which took place through a variety of media, and generated items of material culture. The artist had a central role to play in the construction of 'Soviet Man', and different forms of artistic expression were used to convey propaganda messages, many of them about the workers who were 'building' the Soviet state. Lenin particularly valued the medium of cinema, for example, and different cinematic techniques such as montage were used to 'engineer the Soviet consciousness'. However, physical material culture also had a part to play, in the form of grandiose and monumental architecture. Forest and Johnson note that monuments and memorials play a unique role in the creation of national identity because they reflect how political elites

choose to represent the nation publicly¹⁰. 'By erecting memorials in public space' they write, 'states... attempt to define the historical figures that become national heroes and establish the historical incidents that become the formative events of a nation's identity'¹¹. They provide an elite representation of the imagined community of the nation. The material culture created through the working of stone contributed to such identity formation in the Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s.

However, while the built environment was important in identity formation in this period, the written word was instrumental. For most of the Soviet era, the news media were under full state control. Major newspapers, such as *Pravda*, *Izvestiya*, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, and *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, were the official organs of party or government agencies. Authors such as Lenoe, Lovell and Brooks have emphasised the way in which the Soviet print media 'created' news and was used as an instrument of political mobilization and social change¹². Brooks argues that from the moment the Bolsheviks 'seized the public lectern' they used the media, and newspapers in particular, to establish a new public culture, which, under Stalin, dominated public discourse, influenced society's behaviour, thereby exerting a powerful influence over society's cognitive apparatus. 'The press', he explains, 'was not coterminous with all public expression, but it contextualized the Soviet experience and imposed a structure on thinking even among nonbelievers...'¹³. Representations of gemworking and Soviet material culture in the print media demonstrate the ways in which the relationship between gemstones and gemworkers and the state was worked out in the early Soviet era. Brooks argues that the central tenet of the Stalinist print media was 'the gift' of the new Soviet society which had been bestowed upon the Soviet people by Stalin, and for which they were forever in his debt. Those who sought to 'repay' this debt through labor for the state were portrayed in the media as

models for other members of society to follow, and became recipients of what Brooks describes as ‘social honor’.

Through this social honor and dishonor, insiders and outsiders were identified, and the Urals gemworkers were keen to be included in the ‘insider’ category, as ‘honorable’ citizens laboring for the state. At the same time, workers in other industries or spheres whose credentials were questionable in the context of the Soviet industrial production-oriented model of modernity, were undergoing a similar transformation. For example, the image of the retail trade had to be recast from that of “an anti-revolutionary practice to a vehicle for socialist acculturation”¹⁴. And as Jenks has noted, painters of *Palekh*, (Russian lacquered boxes decorated with intricate depictions of traditional Russian and Russian Orthodox scenes) endured a period of ridicule and persecution as ‘god-daubers’, before both they and their artwork were rehabilitated, culminating in the exhibition of *Palekh* in the State Russian Museum, and the ordering of *Palekh* desk-sets for prominent Soviet figures including Maksim Gorky¹⁵. While there are parallels to be drawn between lapidaries and *Palekh* painters in terms of the perception of the artisans, gemwork was unusual in that the focus of attention was also on the medium of production, the stone itself. Focussing on *Russkiye Samotsvety*, the following sections explore, first, the ways in which lapidaries were rehabilitated as laborers for the Soviet cause and represented as useful Soviet citizens, and second, how gemworkers and the Soviet state managed to reclaim gemstones from their Tsarist heritage.

Remaking and Re-presenting Workers

By 1917, under the Tsarist regime, many forms of artisan work had reached a high standard of production in Russia. Gemworking had reached a very high level of development, partly due to the fact that Russia was extremely well-endowed with mineral

deposits¹⁶. Stone had had significance for the state since at least the 16th century, evidenced by the abundance of gems used as jewellery or to decorate the clothes, regalia, and interiors of the palaces of the Tsars. The Urals became known as an area rich in such deposits, with perfect-quality malachite¹⁷ discovered at the turn of the 19th century. On the basis of such discoveries, a small 18th century Urals workshop developed into a large factory, *Russkiye Samotsvety*, (Russian Gemstones) manned by a host of experienced craftsmen, often members of the same families who passed on their skills and traditions in working hard minerals from generation to generation. The factory had very close links with the Tsar, producing commissioned items such as a map of France made of precious and semi-precious stones, given as a gift from the Tsar to the people of France at the 1900 Paris exhibition¹⁸. It is interesting to note that while a more famous lapidary firm, *Fabergé*, perished after the 1917 Revolution, due in part to its close connections to the Imperial family, Sverdlovsk's *Russkiye Samotsvety* continued its relationship with the changing state throughout the Soviet era, into the post-Soviet period, and until the present day.

Trained in the Tsarist era, and, as highly skilled manufacturers of luxury goods, of questionable utility in the new Soviet proletarian state, lapidaries had to present themselves, their industry and their skills as useful to the new regime, in the context of forced and rapid industrialisation, and investment in heavy industry¹⁹. However, gemworkers were not alone - as Lewin has written, the urban population of NEP Russia numbered some seven hundred thousand artisans²⁰. In the context of the USSR's comparative economic backwardness, and of threats to national security, it was considered essential to achieve industrialization for the purposes of self-defence, but also, and more importantly, as the only route to a socialist society. This industrialisation was focussed on the kind of activities that would strengthen the economy of the USSR –

coal mining and timber felling for electricity, iron ore and steel, and chemical industries. It was a radical reshaping of the pre-existing economy of Russia, which had previously been a largely agrarian society. Many artisan industries suffered during this period, with activities like the production of ‘luxuries’ such as fine lead glass, elite furniture and complex gilt brocade textiles going into decline²¹. However, despite this, some of the most unlikely activities, including gemworking and *Palekh*, survived. The war years were a turning point. Some plants such as *Russkiye Samotsvety* gave production capacity over to military requirements, but in the post-war years managed to resurrect their original function – perhaps as a consequence of having been able to validate their pre-war existence.

While the workers in these artisan industries were often involved in the production of items of great symbolic importance to the USSR, they have so far received little attention in the historical literature. Studies of early Soviet labor focus almost exclusively on classical industrial workers, and while many specific sub-sectors of the Soviet industrial workforce, including the Stakhanovites²², have been examined in some detail²³, artisan workers have received relatively little attention. However many of the theories developed to understand the role of blue and white-collar workers in the Stalin era apply equally well, and in some cases intriguingly, to the artisans.

Fitzpatrick describes the ‘remaking of men’ under the Soviet regime²⁴. Under Stalin, work in the Tsarist regime was portrayed as an exhausting, soul-destroying chore, whereas under socialism it was the thing that filled life with meaning. Moreover, it was also seen as a transformative experience, associated with ideas of remaking that were at the heart of the Soviet project. The concept of transformation through work permeated the world of lapidaries, who were of course applying skills learned during long

apprenticeships in the pre-Revolutionary era. It was through the process of ‘remaking’ themselves as Soviet workers that these craftsmen could become recipients of Brooks’ ‘social honor’ and thus be seen as honorable and worthy Soviet citizens. This process is depicted in contemporary accounts of lapidaries both remaking themselves as Soviet workers, and reclaiming the riches of the earth for the Soviet cause. Contemporary accounts from Sverdlovsk, a city literally built upon deposits of semi-precious stones²⁵, describe just this, and the notion of remaking workers is particularly strongly emphasised in the discourse surrounding the Kremlin Stars.

On five of the towers of the Kremlin in Moscow, (Spasskiy, Nikolskiy, Troitskiy, Borovitskiy and Vodovzvodniy) there are large illuminated five-pointed red stars made of glass, erected in November 1937. While these stars are an immediately recognisable landmark and symbol of the Soviet era, they were not the first such emblems to top the Kremlin towers. Since before the Revolution, the three tallest towers, the Nikolskiy, Troitskiy and Borovitskiy had been topped with the double-headed eagles of the imperial Russian state²⁶. In November 1935, these symbols were replaced by four bronze five-pointed stars studded with semi-precious stones from the Urals, and featuring the hammer and sickle emblem of the USSR. Each star was distinguishable by its size (ranging from 3½ to 4½ metres in diameter) and decoration. For example, the star for the Spasskiy tower had a depiction of rays of light issuing from its centre; whereas for the Troitskiy star the rays took the form of ears of corn.

Figure 1 Kremlin Star (Pravda 23/10/1935)

Figure 2 Star erected on the Spasskiy tower (Pravda 25/10/1935)

Figure 3 View of the Nikolskiy tower star (Pravda 27/10/1935)

The common feature of the stars was the emblem of the hammer and sickle in Urals gemstones, fixed to both sides. Each emblem was two metres wide and weighed 240 kilograms, and the average weight of each star in total was nearly a metric tonne. Articles from *Uralskij Rabochi*, the local Sverdlovsk newspaper, from 30 August and 14 September 1935 reported that the emblems were encrusted with amethysts, alexandrite²⁷, topazes and aquamarines, ordered from *Russkiye Samotsvety*²⁸.

On 14 September 1935, during the period of construction of the four Stars, a report appeared in *Uralskiye Rabochi*. Typical of the publication, and the context of the time, the report is written in a tone at once of breathless but deferential excitement. It describes the arduous process by which stone of suitably high quality was selected to decorate the Kremlin stars, the experience and expert eye necessary to identify the potential of uncut stone, and the apparent delight of the craftsmen at being involved in so important a task. In the report, the rock crystal of the Berezovskii deposits under Sverdlovsk is described as having won ‘world renown’ for its purity, transparency, and color. However, while the stone is portrayed as remarkable in itself, this is as nothing when compared to the apparently supernatural skill of the craftsmen who prospected for it, excavated and worked it. Raw, uncut crystal was brought to the factory, where the craftsmen derived from it a ‘radiant rainbow’, earning them the apparently longstanding nickname ‘animators of stone’.

The first step in creating the gems for the Kremlin Stars was to select raw stones with which to work. It seems that none of the stones amongst the factory’s existing resources were of suitable size or quality, so the oldest hereditary craftsmen of the factory, those to whom lapidary skills had been passed from father to son through the Tsarist era, were dispatched into the mountains to find new stones. Here, it was the age and the Imperial-

era experience of the craftsmen, described as ‘great connoisseurs of stone’ which qualified them to identify the best stones for the Kremlin Stars. Their skill at prospecting was directly linked the potential magnificence of the stars themselves, and in the article, the quality of the stone they would find was directly related to the ‘brightness of the great motherland’. Despite being removed from their workshops and sent to search through ‘muddy layers of rock’, quotations from the craftsmen themselves suggest that the experience was a pure delight – “This work is a great joy, a great happiness for us!” – and they express pride that the work of their hands would take such a prominent position on the Moscow skyline. Having found and excavated the stone, it is again the oldest, most experienced craftsmen who are tasked with shaping it and cutting the facets – ‘the most responsible and laborious work’.

In line with the findings of Fitzpatrick²⁹, while the article makes much of the fact that the craftsmen gained their experience under the Tsar, it is also careful to contrast their Imperial experience with this Soviet state commission. Taking on a tone of melancholy, the article focuses on Comrades Semenov and Tataurov, veterans of 40 years’ experience in the factory, who worked on the Imperial commission of the Map of France made of Urals gemstones, given by the Tsar to the people of France at the Paris *Exposition Universelle* of 1900. The article describes the craftsmen in glowing terms; their ‘golden hands’ compelling ‘dead stone’ to take on the form of the departments of France, and emphasises what it portrays as the grossly unfair treatment of the craftsmen in view of the Map’s success at the Exposition. The Map was acclaimed in Paris, and the foreman who supervised the gem work is reported to have received ‘praise and distinction, ribbons and orders and a thousand rubles in cash’ while the craftsmen themselves had to make do with a derisory reward of three rubles. The report argues that the ill-feeling

among the craftsmen at the desultory nature of this payment, as an indication of labor conditions under the Tsar, led them to compose a poem:

“Reward split

Craftsman stored up injury, heavy like stone

Time removed this injury, on the shoulders of the Revolution...

With such pleasure, with such gladness they work.”

Focussing again on individual stories, the article follows the story of one Danil Zverev, a man reported to have spent almost all of his life prospecting for gold and stone in the taiga, and to have opened up several gemstone deposits. Despite his professional success, however, ‘happiness did not come just like that’ to Zverev. According to the newspaper, only after the 1917 Revolution was his knowledge and skill appreciated. The paper reports that under the Soviet state he was presented with a personal pension, took part in expeditions of academic science, travelled to Leningrad with the prominent academic Fersman³⁰, and that his signature is in the book of visitors to the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. To emphasize the apparent improvement in general worker satisfaction in the Soviet era, the article returns, again with breathless excitement, to the Kremlin Stars, describing the state commission as an ‘urgent order!’ It quotes the craftsmen as saying that “the moment, when in the rays of the sun, or the searchlights of the Kremlin, the stars sprinkle on the century a thousand fires will be the greatest reward for us, and for the whole factory”.

Throughout, the article emphasises the value of the gemworkers’ Imperial training and the hereditary nature of their craftsmanship for their current work for the Soviet state, portraying them as skilful and hardworking members of Soviet society, rescued from

unequal and unrewarding labor for the Tsar to fulfil a useful and valuable role in the new proletarian society. It portrays them as loyal citizens working hard and with enthusiasm to produce items which will symbolise the might and magnificence of the USSR. As if to emphasize this point still further, at its close, the article turns once again to Zverev, the unsung hero of Imperial Urals gemworking, now celebrated as a master craftsman, for his comment; “maybe in these stars there will be stone from the deposits that I found. And there will be stone, worked by my son and my comrades... one day, when we talk about these stars, there will be a day, when I see them with my own eyes.”

While this newspaper article relied on reasonably subtle comparisons of the Imperial and the Soviet eras in terms of the nature of labor and reward, and workers’ dedication, satisfaction and pride in their work, others employed outlandish claims and hyperbole. Finding happiness through the act of preparing stone for Soviet monumental architecture was a common theme in newspaper reports from the *Russkiye Samotsvety* factory in the mid-1930s, but one craftsman seems have had a far more dramatic and life-altering experience than usual. A report in *Uralskiy Rabochi* from 27 June 1936 tells the story of Nikolai Mikhailovich Veselovsky, (referred to throughout by the familiar form ‘Mikhailich’), who is held up as an example of the transformation of Tsarist craftsmen to Soviet workers. As Brooks has written, the Soviet press emphasized the achievements of individual ‘notables’ who were representative of various segments of Soviet society. These ‘notables’, of whom Mikhailich could be argued to be one, served as models to be emulated by other Soviet citizens, and as the incarnation of ‘social honor’³¹. Mikhailich was a senior craftsman chosen by the factory to prepare topazes for the Kremlin Stars, portrayed as having been a surly old curmudgeon before the commission apparently transformed him into a youthful, revitalised and joyful worker, even displaying Stakhanovite tendencies. The report claims that despite the fact that the Stars

commission brought him ‘months of intense work’, the craftsman ‘grew much younger’, becoming ‘cheerful’ and ‘talkative’, and ‘singing at the machine bench’. He appears to have become both inspired and obsessed by the Stars themselves, slaving over the commissioned topazes, then in the depths of despair when initially unable to recognise his stones from the grainy photographs of the Stars printed in the newspapers (Figures 2-4). Upon finally identifying his stones (‘by their facets’) he is again joyful. The themes of delight at involvement in so significant a project, and dedicated hard work to deliver the order are common to most of these articles, and to many more like them, but in the discussion of Mikhailich, a theme new to the reporting of gemworking but familiar from reports of other branches of production emerges – Mikhailich is praised for ‘standing out from the rest’ and for ‘overfulfilling the production norm’.

In such typically clichéd newspaper articles, workers were portrayed as changed people in the Soviet era, and by extension, the reputation of their profession benefited from this rehabilitation. But there was also specific concern over the nature of gemworking, and the relevance of gemworking as an art form. Reporting on an exhibition of gemstone art in Sverdlovsk, the Secretary of the Exhibition Committee wrote for *Uralskiy Rabochi*, 4 July 1938, that an aim of the exhibition had to be to help gemworking to ‘create new themes, to reflect our revolutionary reality, our victory, the heroics of the great Stalinist epoch’. Despite the fact that the exhibition featured one of Stalin’s own phrases about the Urals picked out in gemstone letters, the comment conveyed a constant striving for a more fitting tribute, and for gemworking to serve the state ever more effectively. There are parallels here with the depiction of *Palekh* as a means of developing both art and consciousness under the Soviet regime; for example, in 1936, the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* had described the role of *Palekh* as “to serve the toiling masses...and the construction of a new life”³². In terms of working conditions and production targets, the

local press reported technological advances that increased output from the gemworking factory; on 8 August 1937, it reported that a new piece of machinery at the factory would not only increase the efficiency of labor in a section of the factory predominantly staffed by women, (important at a time when women's labor was critical both for the industrialisation drive and for the Soviet gender equality policy) but would also increase output by four hundred percent³³.

Reclaiming Stone

While it was the finished, painted form of *Palekh* rather than the wood from which it was made that had come to signify 'backward' rural Russia and the Orthodox Church, for lapidary it was the raw material, i.e. precious and semi-precious stone, that had become synonymous with the Tsarist era, and in particular with the luxury and opulence of the Imperial palaces and lifestyle. Both were equally inimical to the new socialist state, and as Semenov and Timofeev write, by the 1920s, the fate of lapidary objects had followed that of other artisan crafts in falling from favour as 'bourgeois survivals'³⁴. But within only a few years, these 'attributes of bourgeois culture' were back in demand in the system of Bolshevik ideological-aesthetic values. Regarding the stone itself, the Soviet state achieved its re-presentation as an appropriate material in the changed context of a proletarian state, and the use of stone was justified in the public discourse –the creation of items of material culture in Moscow was reported in the press for people who may never see them with their own eyes. An analysis of contemporary local and national press sources, and quotations from prominent Soviet figures suggests that there were four main themes present in the discourse surrounding such items of material culture – stone was portrayed as valuable, as symbolic, as a material reclaimed from its Tsarist heritage, and as a powerful material which had an effect on those who saw it.

Firstly, as elsewhere, the use of stone in Soviet material culture was validated by its rarity, and an example of its use in this way is that of Soviet medals. The highest order of the Soviet Union was the Order of Victory, awarded only 21 times, to generals and marshals only for successful operations, on more than one front, which resulted in a radical change in the tide of battle in favour of the USSR. It featured 150 diamonds, and five rubies. In other Orders, the use of precious stone denoted the class of the medal. The Order of Nachimov was established March 1944, lay 15th in the order of precedence of Soviet medals, and was awarded to naval officers for success in the planning, execution, and support of naval operations that achieved victory over a numerically superior enemy, crushed an enemy offensive, or ensured successful operations that inflicted serious damage on the enemy. The First Class version of the Order featured a 53mm star made of rubies, whereas in the Second Class the rubies were replaced with red enamel. There is also a general representation of stone as the best quality material, used for items of state importance, such as the selection of semi-precious stones for the Kremlin Stars, and high quality rhodonite for the tomb of Henri Barbusse (Figure 4).

Figure 4 The tomb of Henri Barbusse

Secondly, the Soviet state justified its appropriation of stone through utilisation of the symbolism of its color and surface figurings. The use of the color red as a marker of Soviet identity was already widespread by the 1920s, having developed from a longstanding positive Russian association with the color. Writing as part of a body of work on Socialist Realist art³⁵, Holz describes the use of a ‘carnival of red’, arguing that ‘a simple illusion of “socialism in one country” could be achieved by systematically coloring red everything that was to be semantically connected with socialist ideology’³⁶. The color itself ‘becomes an allegorical device’³⁷. By using red in this way, the state was taking

advantage of a longstanding Russian linguistic convention, in which the color red '*krasnyi*' became identifiable with the moral level of the beautiful '*krasnyi*' and was thereby interpreted favourably. In Socialist Realist art, Holz argues, the use of red was an attempt to allegorically transform socialist ideology or 'redness' directly into objects of moral beauty or worth³⁸. Rubies were therefore highly valued, and less expensive minerals, such as rhodonite and jasper, were also selected for their reddish-pink color. The pairing of red and black was used for three items associated with death and mourning –the Lenin funereal plaque, the Lenin mausoleum, and the memorial to Henri Barbusse. In 1924 the *Russkiye Samostvety* factory made the Lenin funereal plaque to convey the sentiments of the miners of the Urals at his death. Unlike much of the subsequent work commissioned from the factory, this piece was simple and understated; 'No rich marble, no malachite, no precious stones. The Urals craftsmen trusted to... an austere combination of red jasper³⁹ and polished jet, black as pitch'⁴⁰. Made from stone sourced in the south Urals, and featuring as its decoration a simple hammer and sickle, the former having special significance as a miners' tool, the plaque was considered at the time to be an 'immediately comprehensible and emotional tribute to the deceased leader'.⁴¹ Oskolkov notes that the cubic form of the Lenin mausoleum - a symbol of eternity – was accentuated by the use of colored granite⁴². In line with architect Shchusev's plans, the entrance to the mausoleum was flanked in black and grey labradorite⁴³, with red granite and raspberry-colored quartzite⁴⁴ symbolising the red of the Revolution, and black gabbro⁴⁵ symbolising mourning. The Henri Barbusse memorial was fashioned from red and black figured marble and pink rhodonite. The rhodonite, its surface naturally figured with swirls of black and grey, was seen to express 'the revolutionary struggle of the writer'⁴⁶. The memorial was a simple but impressive structure, an obelisk mounted on a horizontal slab, featuring a bust of the author and appropriate inscriptions in the Roman alphabet. It was

made in the Sverdlovsk factory in 1936, and was erected in the Paris graveyard of Père Lachaise, where it stands today⁴⁷.

Having established that stone was both rare and beautiful, and that its color and figuring had symbolic effect, the state sought to publicly ‘reclaim’ it for the Soviet people, through a discourse primarily articulated in published writings on the Moscow Metro. As Neutatz has written, the Moscow Metro is one of the most grandiose and ornamental architectural achievements of the Stalin period⁴⁸. In June 1931 a plan for the Metro was officially adopted, and by 1958 the last of the stations planned under Stalin was completed. Over the intervening years, Soviet architects, designers, sculptors, painters and workers collaborated to produce 47 stations with halls and platforms resembling ballrooms rather than transport facilities – there were chandeliers, sconces, monumental sculptures, stained glass panels, and significantly, stone columns, cladding and mosaics⁴⁹. The practical purpose of the Moscow Metro was to move citizens to and from work, but it also had enormous ideological importance, much of which derived from its underground interiors. As O’Mahony has written, during the 1930s the Metro became one of the key arenas for the production and consumption of official visual culture, with many of the nation’s most respected architects, sculptors, and artists employed in its design and decoration⁵⁰. Each station had its own unique decorative system, and the diverse station interiors were both a demonstration of the pre-eminence of the socialist system, and also a means of identification for illiterate passengers. The sensation of travelling on the Metro was intended to be one of moving through a series of ‘grand and richly decorated galleries’⁵¹. However, while the Metro was an ‘underground palace’ beneath the streets of Moscow, its magnificence was also to be appreciated further afield. The New York Times reported in an article of 17 May 1939 that at that city’s World’s

Fair, the Soviet pavilion contained ‘a full-size replica of a Moscow subway station, decorated with frescos and finished in marble’.

The Moscow Metro was intended to be set apart from foreign underground systems with their ‘cryptlike’ interiors. To achieve this, architects needed to create brightly lit, high-ceilinged chambers, and to clad them with reflective surfaces; they chose marble for every station in the first Metro line. Marble decorates about half the area of the walls of the Moscow Metro, and much originates in the Urals, such as that used at ‘Belorusskaya’, ‘Ploshchad Revolutsii’, ‘Elektrozavodskaya’ and ‘Aeroport’, stations. Deep-red marble from Georgia adorns ‘Krasnye Vorota’ station, there is grey marble, again from the Urals, in ‘Lubyanka’, ‘Sokolniki’, ‘Paveletskaya’ and ‘Chystye Prudy’ stations, and velvet-pink marble from the Russian Far East at ‘Byelorusskaya’ and ‘Aeroport’. Raspberry-colored quartzite from Kareliya decorates the underground hall of ‘Baumanskaya’ station, and marble onyx from Armenia was fashioned into panels for ‘Dynamo’, ‘Byelorusskaya’ and ‘Kievskaya’ stations. In terms of the *Russkiye Samotsvety* factory’s contribution, it worked stone used in 1935 at ‘Chystye Prudy’⁵², 1938 at ‘Kurskaya’ and later in the 1950s at ‘Botanicheskiy Sad’⁵³ station⁵⁴.

Kettering reports that early station architects made mathematical calculations to ensure that light would reflect from the marble with the desired brilliance, and during the hours of closure (1-5am) an army of cleaners would polish the marble and any damaged panels would be replaced⁵⁵. By the time the second Metro line was under construction, it was almost a given that marble would be used, as it was by Ivan Fomin, architect of Sverdlov Square station. Fomin was able to draw upon a wider range of marble types than had been used for the first line, and he selected three different varieties of white Urals marble cut with decorative details for the walls of the station interior. The floor was a

chequerboard of black and yellow marble, and in the final plans for the station, the whole design was picked out in gilt bronze⁵⁶. For Dynamo, another station on the second line, choice of marble was again significant – Tagilian marble from the Urals was selected for the square pillars of the station interior, for its rich dark red color with embedded grey crystals. The walls between the marble pillars were clad in onyx, ranging in hues from golden yellow to milky white⁵⁷.

Writing at the end of the Stalin period, Pavlovskii described the decoration of the Metro stations as imbued with important ideological and political value, particularly in terms of the use of marble⁵⁸. Although this piece of writing postdates the newspaper articles of the 1930s by twenty years, it was still subject to the restrictions and emphases of Stalin-era print media, and constituted part of the public discourse of material culture. Using the example of the escalator hall in Kurskaya station, where black and pink Urals marble generated ‘a saturation of color, creating an expressive interior’, Pavlovskii contended that while the stones used in the Metro, marble, jasper, malachite and so on, were traditional in character, in that they had been worked before the Soviet era, these substances had become ‘sated with the new meanings of the Soviet epoch’ and ‘penetrated by vital feeling, reflecting...our Soviet validity, sated with high moral substance’⁵⁹.

Lazar Kaganovich, Politburo member and ally of Stalin, after whom the Metro was named until 1955, touched upon the effect that viewing the stone work would have upon passengers on the Metro;

The peasant or worker is able to see in the underground, in these marble columns, not just marble, not just a fine technical construction. He sees in the underground an embodiment of our strength and power. Earlier, only

landowners, only rich men, used marble, and now that power is ours, this construction is for us, workers and peasants; our marble columns are Soviet, socialist⁶⁰.

Not only was stone thereby reclaimed and validated as an appropriate material from which to construct items of Soviet material culture, but it was also seen to have an impact on those who encountered it. As well as on the grand scale of the Metro, much smaller items made from stone were also claimed to have an effect. In an account written at the end of the Stalinist period, Pavlovskii discussed the production of a medal for the best marksman of Sverdlovsk by the *Russkiiye Samotsvety* factory⁶¹. The medal was to be made of precious and semi-precious stone, and in its production, the maker was aspiring to create a product which would reflect the heightened sense of aesthetics of the Soviet person⁶². The craftsman Podkorytov produced a medal made from six colored stones, including jasper, marble and ruby. Pavlovskii cites Podkorytov's 1936 memoirs of making the medal, in which he records that when the military customer came to collect it, he said 'Now our marksman will never give this medal away. Because of it he will now shoot even better.' Podkorytov expressed his belief that the sight of the marksman winning the medal would become keener, because 'the medal is better than any propaganda'⁶³.

Conclusion

This paper has used examples of items of material culture made or contributed to by the workers of the Sverdlovsk *Russkiiye Samotsvety* factory, and the subjective representations of Stalinist cultural life in the print media and published literature that portray the multifaceted discourse surrounding the reclaiming of precious and semi-precious stone and gemworkers from their Imperial past. It argues that both stone and its craftsmen were reclaimed through the integration of gemworking and gemworkers into the central

themes of the print media; the notions of repaying the Stalinist ‘gift’, of social honor, and of industrial overproduction. By looking at the gemworkers of one Urals factory, this paper shows that while a craft such as this may have initially seemed alien to the aims of the Stalinist regime, through its integration into established contemporary discourses around Stalinist cultural norms, and the drive for industrialisation, it became acceptable and valued, and its workers became recipients of ‘social honor’ in the same way as notables in more conventional industries and walks of life. Buzzwords such as ‘rebirth’, ‘overproduction’, and ‘reclamation’, which, as Fitzpatrick points out⁶⁴, caught the public’s imagination when used in connection with juvenile delinquents and criminals, were applied with the same effect to this band of imperial artisans, thereby including them amongst the ‘honorable’ citizens laboring for the state. Ironically, it is precisely the fact that these artisans were instrumental in the creation of items of Soviet material culture which came to represent the new regime itself, and the glorification of their achievements in the media, that allowed this transformation to take place.

More questions remain, however. The working of stone was not limited to cutting and polishing in a Sverdlovsk workshop; the cutting and polishing of precious and semi-precious stone for monumental architecture and for statement pieces such as medals and ornaments is only part of a range of functions related to stonework. Others include stonemasons carving Soviet symbols into the fabric of buildings; architects choosing raw materials and designing spaces based on the specific properties of particular types of stone; construction workers building monumental architecture, and at the opposite end of the spectrum, the manufacture of jewelry from precious and semi-precious stone. It may be that the bourgeois connotations of personal adornment were simply too difficult to align with the preoccupations of the time, at least in the public media, but consideration of this form of gemwork would potentially shed light upon the gendered

nature of lapidary. As portrayed in the media, and therefore as presented here, *Russkiye Samotsvety* appears to have been an almost exclusively male domain; women played a role in the production process, but apparently not as highly skilled cutters or polishers of stone. Most conspicuous in their absence from the public discourses used as source material here, however, are considerations of the labor which mined these contested raw materials from the Soviet earth, much of which was surely deployed via the Stalinist Gulag. It is not inconceivable that the very stone that was cut and polished in Sverdlovsk, and which adorned the Kremlin stars, the Moscow Metro and the Lenin Mausoleum, was hewn by those whose identity was transformed by imprisonment and punishment, but whose labor was instrumental in transforming the Soviet state itself.

Monuments are understood as dynamic sites of meaning, but I argue that the dynamism of that meaning is not limited to the imaginations of the states commissioning monuments or to the audiences who subsequently view them, but that it also reflects the significance of monuments for those involved in their construction. Seeing these Soviet era monuments as embodiments of the labor of their makers allows us to investigate the transforming relationships between material, worker and state.

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¹ There is no agreed definition or classification of precious and semi-precious stone, so for the purposes of this paper, 'precious stone' will be considered to include diamond, emerald and ruby, while topaz, almandine, alexandrite and stone used in larger quantities, such as marble, quartz, jasper and amethyst, will be considered 'semi-precious'.

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⁹ Cooke, Catherine, Preface, in Reid, Susan and David Berg (eds) *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*. Oxford, Berg, (2000).

¹⁰ Forest & Johnson (2002), *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid*, 526

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- ¹³ Brooks (2000) *ibid*, xiii, xiv.
- ¹⁴ Randall, Amy 'Legitimizing Soviet Trade: Gender and the Feminization of the Retail Workforce in the Soviet 1930s' *Journal of Social History* 37(4) 965-990, (2004) p967
- ¹⁵ Jenks, A 'From Periphery to Center: Palekh and Indigenization in the Russian Heartland' *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 3, 3, 427-58 (2002); Randall (2004) *ibid*.
- ¹⁶ Pekov reports that nearly 600 mineral species were first described in the region during the time of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Pekov, I. V. *Minerals first discovered on the territory of the former Soviet Union*. Moscow: Ocean Pictures, (1998).
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- ¹⁸ Heffernan, Michael. 'From Russia with Love? A Tsarist map of France and the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900', paper presented at Maps and Society, Warburg Institute, University of London, January 23rd 2003
- ¹⁹ Lewis Siegelbaum & Grigor Suny (eds) *Making Workers Soviet: Power Class and Identity*. New York: Cornell University Press, (1994) p1
- ²⁰ Lewin, Moshe. 'Society, state and ideology during the First Five Year Plan', in Chris Ward (ed). *The Stalinist Dictatorship*. London: Hodder, (1998), pp166-204; Jenks (2004) *ibid*.
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²⁵ Construction of an underground metro system in Sverdlovsk was curtailed due to the extreme difficulty of excavating the rock on which the city stands.

²⁶ The Byzantine double-headed eagle first appeared as the symbol of Rus' on the seal of Ivan III in 1497. Symbolising the unity of the spiritual and temporal powers, the two heads face East and West

²⁷ A gem variety of the mineral chrysoberyl that changes color from green in daylight to red in incandescent light, Alexandrite was named after Tsar Alexander II on the occasion of his coming of age, as its green and red colors were the same as the old Russian imperial colors.

²⁸ Before the stars were set in place, they were put on show for one day in Gorky Park, in central Moscow, and were duly visited by the great and the good of the city and regional apparatus. Newspaper reports in *Izvestiya* from 24 October 1935 and *Vechernaya Moskva* from the following day describe the park as overflowing with Muscovites and visitors to the capital. Over the next few days the stars were hoisted into position atop the four towers, as reported in *Izvestiya* on 28 October. However, after only a few years on display, and possibly due to obscuration of the gemstones due to air pollution in the atmosphere over the industrial city, it was decided that to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the 1917 Revolution, five new glass stars would be made, to adorn five of the Kremlin towers. The star formerly on the Spasskoy Tower, can now be seen on the spire of the building of North River Passenger Port in Khimki, Moscow.

²⁹ Fitzpatrick (1999) *ibid*

³⁰ Fersman was a well-known Soviet academic expert in lapidary.

³¹ Brooks (2000) *ibid*, p105.

³² Jenks (2002) *ibid*, p454

³³ Although women's labor was therefore an important part of the production of gemstone goods from the *Russkiye Samotsveti* factory, there is very little reporting of their role in the factory in the local print media.

³⁴ Semenov, Vladislav & Nikolai Timofeev. *Kniga Reznogo Khudoshstva*. Sverdlovsk: Nezavisimiy Institut Istorii Materialnoy Kultury, Istoriko-Gemmologicheskoye Obshestvo 'Lithica', (2001) p87

³⁵ Holz, Wolfgang, 'Allegory and iconography in Socialist Realist Painting' p74, in Cullerne Bown, Matthew and Brandon Taylor, eds *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917-1992* (1992) Manchester: Manchester University Press. See also Cullerne Bown, Matthew *Socialist Realist Painting*.

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³⁶ Holz 1993, *ibid*, p74

³⁷ *ibid*, p75

³⁸ *ibid*

³⁹ Jasper is an opaque, impure cryptocrystalline quartz, usually red, but also yellow, green, and greyish blue in color.

⁴⁰ Semenov & Timofeev. (2001) *ibid*, p87

⁴¹ *ibid*

⁴² Oskolkov, Vladimir A. *Oblitsovochkiye Kamni Mestorozhdenii SSSR*. Moscow: Nedra, (1984), 169

⁴³ Labradorite is named for Labrador, where it was first discovered. It is also found in Madagascar, India, Newfoundland, Finland, and Russia. Its distinctive flash of iridescent colors is known as ‘labradorescence’. These flashes of color change according to the angle of light refraction, and may be blue, green, yellow, and pink, with the majority of the stone itself a dark grey in color.

⁴⁴ Quartzite is a stone composed entirely of quartz grains, with the raspberry-colored variety found only in Karelia

⁴⁵ Gabbro is a medium or coarse-grained rock that consists primarily of plagioclase feldspar and pyroxene.

⁴⁶ Pavlovskii, Boris *Kamneroznoye Iskusstvo Urala*. Sverdlovsk: Sverdlovskoye Knizhnoye Izdatel'stvo, (1953) p119

⁴⁷ Semenov and Timofeev (2001) *ibid*

⁴⁸ Neutatz, Dietmar. *Die Moskauer Metro: Von den ersten Projekten bis zur Großbaustelle des Stalinismus (1897-1935)* Cologne: Böhlau, 2001

⁴⁹ Kettering, Karen ‘An Introduction to the Design of the Moscow Metro in the Stalin Period: “The Happiness of Life Underground”’, *Decorative Arts* 7, 2, (2000a) , pp2-20

⁵⁰ O'Mahony, Mike. ‘Archaeological Fantasies: Constructing History on the Moscow Metro’, *The Modern Language Review* 98, 1, pp138-150, (2003) p139

⁵¹ Kettering (2000a) *ibid*, p8

⁵² Today's ‘Chisty Prudi’ station was originally known as ‘Kirovskaya’

⁵³ The 'Botanicheskii Sad' station of the 1950s is now known as 'Prospekt Mira'

⁵⁴ Pavlovskii 1953, 122-3

⁵⁵ Kettering, Karen 'Sverdlov Square Metro Station: "The Friendship of the Peoples" and the Stalin Consitution' *Decorative Arts* (2000b) 7, 2, pp21-47

⁵⁶ Kettering, Karen (2000b) *ibid*

⁵⁷ Wunsche, Isabel. "Homo Sovieticus: The Athletic Motif in the Design of the Dynamo Metro Station" *Decorative Arts* 7, 2, (2000), pp65-90

⁵⁸ Pavlovskii (1953) *ibid*, p123

⁵⁹ *ibid*, p124

⁶⁰ *Arkhitektura Moskovskogo metropolitena*, Moscow, 1936, p13

⁶¹ Pavlovskii (1953) *ibid*

⁶² *ibid* p124. For a discussion of the acquisition of culture in the early Soviet era, see Fitzpatrick (1999) and Figs (2002).

⁶³ *Taiinye skazii rabochikh Urala*, Sverdlovsk, 1936, p123, cited in Pavlovskii (1953) *ibid*, p124

⁶⁴ Fitzpatrick, (1999) *ibid*, p76